



# EQUALITY NOW

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**Re: Information on Liberia for Consideration by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women at its 62<sup>nd</sup> Pre-Sessional Working Group (9-13 March 2015)**

Distinguished Committee Members,

We respectfully submit this letter in advance of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women's (the Committee's) discussion of Liberia at its 62<sup>nd</sup> Pre-Sessional Working Group (9-13 March 2015). Equality Now is an international human rights organization with ECOSOC status working to protect and promote the rights of women and girls worldwide since 1992, including through our membership network comprised of individuals and organizations in over 190 countries.

This letter, submitted in consultation with Equality Now's partners in Liberia, including Women's NGO Secretariat of Liberia (WONGOSOL) and Women of Liberia Peace Network (WOLPNET), will focus on continued violations against women and girls, including female genital mutilation in Liberia in violation of Article 2(f) (legislation required to abolish discriminatory customs and practices) of the Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ("the Convention"), as well as Article 2 (equality) and Article 3 (non-discrimination) generally and discrimination under the nationality law which directly violates Article 9 on nationality rights. We take note of the continuing effects of ebola in Liberia and extend our sympathies to all those who have suffered loss. However, we remain concerned at several ongoing breaches of the Convention and would like to encourage the government to continue its efforts to address them without delay.

The Liberian Constitution guarantees the rights of life, liberty and security of person to all Liberians. Section 38 of the Children's Act (2011) bans "all forms of harmful cultural practices." Despite its international, regional and national obligations, Liberia does not enforce this provision and does not have a law specifically banning FGM. In addition, although the current Constitution provides that either parent can pass nationality to their children, Section 20.1(b) of the Aliens and Nationality Law: Part III, Nationality and Naturalization 1973-1974 discriminates on the basis of sex. This is in direct violation of Article 9 of the Convention.

## *Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)*

Over 58.2 percent of Liberian women and girls, some as young as three years old, have undergone FGM as an initiation rite into womanhood in different ethnic groups. The forms of FGM practiced in Liberia are Type II – where the clitoris and labia minora (smaller lips) are removed leaving the labia majora (larger lips) intact; and Type I or clitoridectomy – the partial or total removal of the clitoris. FGM poses serious physical and mental health risks for women and girls. A 2006 World Health Organization multi-country study found that complications during delivery are more likely to occur among women who have undergone FGM and the rate of prenatal deaths is 1-2 percent higher for the babies of such women.

FGM in Liberia is propagated by a politically influential female secret society known as the Sande, in which young girls attending traditional Sande schools go through the process of indoctrination of social and traditional training and graduate to womanhood. FGM is a key element of this indoctrination and allows their membership into the society, considering them "clean" and eligible for marriage, capable of child-bearing, and eventually able to hold important societal roles and offices. Until December 2011, the Liberian Ministry of Internal Affairs issued permits to the women, known as Zoes, who run these schools and who carry out FGM on the girls in attendance. Mrs. Marpue Speare, director of WONGOSOL, has stated that social and cultural circumstances in Liberia do not allow girls and women to oppose FGM or to escape, though some girls resort to running away due to lack of protection under the law. In some cases, like in the case of Ruth Berry Peal detailed below, women and girls from non-practicing communities are forced to undergo FGM by the Sande society.

Equality Now has been monitoring cases of FGM around the world including in Liberia. Equality Now issued actions (petitions) with our partners regarding FGM in Liberia in 2010 and 2012. See Action 37.1 (April 2010, updated 8 July 2011): *Liberia: Ensure justice in the case of Ruth Berry Peal who was forcibly subjected to FGM*,<sup>1</sup> and Action 37.2 (26 June 2012, updated 12 March 2013): *Liberia: Enact a law banning FGM as a matter of urgency*.<sup>2</sup>

In January 2010, Ms. Peal, a wife, mother, and a member of the Kru Tribe, a community that does not practice FGM, had an argument with two women from the Gola ethnic group and was summoned by the Gola Chief who ruled that she undergo FGM by the Sande society. The following day, Ms. Peal was forcibly taken from her home to the "bush" where she was genitally mutilated in an initiation ritual, was forced to take an oath of secrecy and was threatened with death if she broke the oath. She was kept in the "bush" for one month and developed health complications, which required three months of treatment following her release.

Ms. Peal filed a lawsuit against the women who forcibly mutilated her, Rose Kerkula and Maima Kanneh. However, because she exposed their practice, Ms. Peal along with her husband and children received threats from the Gola community and the Zoes of the Sande. In July 2011, the two women were found guilty of kidnapping, felonious restraint, and theft of property and were sentenced to three years imprisonment. However, the defendants appealed the judgment and were released on bail. On 24 January 2013, the First Judicial Circuit Criminal Court dismissed their appeal on the grounds that "the defendants did not file an approved bill of exceptions or did not secure the approval of the trial judge on the purported bill of exceptions." On 26 February 2013, the Court issued a letter commanding the Sheriff of Montserrado to arrest the defendants.

Equality Now is gravely concerned that it has been almost two years and the government has still failed to arrest and jail the perpetrators, and that effective measures have not been taken to protect

Ms. Peal and her family. Ms. Peal continues to be threatened by members of the Sande society and supporting traditional leaders in response to bringing her case before a court. Ms. Peal was forced to relocate from her home and family in Bomi to Monrovia for safety measures. Even though she is back in Bomi with her family, she continues to face stigma and abuse from members of the community including the convicted women who accuse her of destroying their tradition.

In June 2011, Equality Now met with the Liberian Minister of Internal Affairs regarding Ms. Peal's case and ending FGM in Liberia. During the meeting he indicated that he would stop the issuance of FGM permits to Zoes and would work with the Ministry of Justice to draft a law banning FGM. In November 2011, the Government took steps towards ending FGM by persuading Sande leaders to suspend all Sande activities and condemned all forms of forcible initiation into the Sande. A ceremony to mark the event took place in the presence of the Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Subsequently in January 2013, the Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a notice to all counties directing that all Sande activities be shut down and underlined that violators would be held liable. This action was further reinforced by a second General Circular released in June 2014, which suspended all Sande and Poro (another secret society) activities for ninety days while their licenses and registration were under review and reaffirms the General Secular No. 12 of January 15, 2013 prohibiting the induction of any person into a "cultural practice or traditional ritual" without supervision by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Despite the alleged ban on Sande activities, according to our partners, Sande activities including FGM continue to be carried out with impunity, thereby undermining efforts towards the total elimination of FGM.

### ***Discriminatory Nationality Law***

Although the Liberian Constitution provides that either parent can pass nationality to their children, the nationality law itself restricts this, which Liberia acknowledges in its Seventh and Eighth Periodic Reports to the Committee. Section 20.1(b) of the Aliens and Nationality Law: Part III, Nationality and Naturalization 1973-1974 discriminates on the basis of sex. The provision states: "A person born outside Liberia whose father (i) was born a citizen of Liberia; (ii) was a citizen of Liberia at the time of the birth of such child, and (iii) had resided in Liberia prior to the birth of such child." In effect, Liberian women cannot pass on their Liberian citizenship to their children who are born abroad, regardless of whether their children are born in or out of wedlock. Fathers, however, can pass on their Liberian citizenship to children born both in Liberia and abroad.<sup>3</sup>

This distinction discriminates against women. This not only denies equality to women and men, but can also result in severe consequences for children such as statelessness, risk of deportation, and lack of access to publicly funded education, health and social benefits and economic opportunities. According the government of Liberia, "Efforts have been made through the Constitution Review Process to address all disparities, particularly as they relate to children born to Liberian mothers with foreign fathers outside of Liberia. This is to harmonize the nationality law with the constitution for all children born of one foreign parent, irrespective of the sex." (CEDAW/C/LBR/7-8, Apr. 2014).

### ***Suggested Questions for the List of Issues***

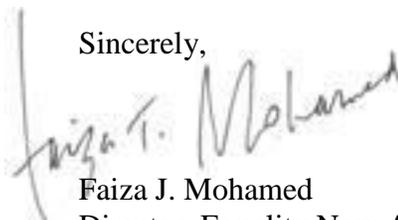
We respectfully urge the Committee to raise in its List of Issues the following questions with the Liberian government regarding violations of the Convention addressed in this letter:

- What are the government's plans for enacting and enforcing a law prohibiting FGM, guaranteeing the protection of women and girls at risk of undergoing FGM and ensuring that the suspension of Sande FGM activities is enforced?

- What policies are in place that will support awareness raising and educational outreach to practicing communities and local chiefs, in particular on the harms of FGM?
- What are the government's plans for ensuring Ruth Berry Peal receives justice and protection, through the intervention of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and National Council of Chiefs if necessary, and for arresting the defendants, Rose Kerkula and Maima Kanneh, and ensuring that they serve their sentence?
- What are the government's plans to amend Section 20.1(b) in Part III of the Aliens and Nationality Law so that women can transfer their nationality on an equal basis with men? What is the government's plan to include a provision in the new Constitution, which

Thank you very much for your kind attention, and please do not hesitate to contact us if we can provide further information.

Sincerely,



Faiza J. Mohamed  
Director, Equality Now Africa Regional Office

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<sup>1</sup> Equality Now, Action 37.1 (April 2010, updated 8 July 2011): *Liberia: Ensure justice in the case of Ruth Berry Peal who was forcibly subjected to FGM*, available at [www.equalitynow.org/take\\_action/fgm\\_action371](http://www.equalitynow.org/take_action/fgm_action371).

<sup>2</sup> Equality Now, Action 37.2 (26 June 2012, updated 12 March 2013): *Liberia: Enact a law banning FGM as a matter of urgency*, available at [www.equalitynow.org/take\\_action/fgm\\_action372](http://www.equalitynow.org/take_action/fgm_action372).

<sup>3</sup> See Equality Now's *Ending Sex Discrimination in Nationality and Citizenship laws* (Updated May 2014), available at [www.equalitynow.org/take\\_action/discrimination\\_in\\_law\\_action471](http://www.equalitynow.org/take_action/discrimination_in_law_action471). Equality Now is also a member of the Global Campaign for Equal Nationality Rights, which aims to eliminate gender discrimination in nationality laws. See [www.equalnationalityrights.org](http://www.equalnationalityrights.org).